

बच्चों के लिये शिक्षा
प्रबन्धन करे

Public Hearing

June 20, 2013

Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Hosted in honor of World Refugee Day

Organized by:

Seemant Lok Sangathan

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Overview

In honor of World Refugee Day on June 20th, 2013, Seemant Lok Sangathan (“Border Area Peoples’ Union”) hosted a public hearing near Rajeev Ghandi Square at Nai Sarak in Jodhpur, India. The event began at 10:00 am and ended around 5:00 pm.

Approximately 1000 people attended the hearing, 400 of them travelling from outside of Jodhpur. Refugees, dignitaries, volunteers, and students were all present from various parts of Rajasthan, particularly Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Barmer, and Bikaner. Those who travelled from outside of Jodhpur were provided food and water from the local community.

Thirty law students interning with the People’s Union for Civil Liberties attended the hearing and conducted surveys of the refugees. Two students from the United States, interning with Seemant Lok Sangathan, were also in attendance and took photos and videos of the event.

The hearing began with an introduction of all the dignitaries on the panel, presented by Mr. Sodha. The panel included Mr. Mahesh Bora, senior advocate in the Rajasthan High Court; Ms. Kavita Srivastava, General Secretary of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties; Mr. DP Joshi, Chairman of the Rajasthan Lawyer’s Association; Mr. Dalip Singh Rajvi, Chairman of the Rajasthan High Court Lawyer’s Association; Mr. Ashok Changani, activist; and Ms. Lad Kumari Jain, Chairman of the Rajasthan State Commission for Women.



Mr. Prem Chand Bhil, a community leader within the Dali Bai settlement in Jodhpur, facilitated the hearing and introduced the speakers. The hearing covered several topics, focusing on the demands outlined by Seemant Lok Sangathan. The banners hanging at the hearing read:

Crying Out For Justice

We demand:

1. Justice for Pakistani minorities
2. Citizenship
3. Education for our children
4. Official refugee status
5. Permanent laws and policies
6. Inclusion in government schemes
7. Rehabilitation packages
8. Simplification of the Visa process
9. Allowance of doctors with Pakistani degrees to practice in India



Both dignitaries and refugees addressed these demands and told stories of their own experiences. The speakers discussed the following issues.

Persecution in Pakistan

Hindus living in Pakistan are faced with religious persecution on a daily basis. Several speakers shared their stories of mistreatment in Pakistan at the public hearing.

Mr. Chetan Ram:

Mr. Ashok Changani, an activist on the panel, asked the community leader Mr. Chetan Ram what problems he faced in Pakistan. Mr. Chetan Ram responded with three examples of outright obstruction and injustice that he witnessed first hand. First, Hindus in Pakistan are not allowed to practice religious rituals, such as performing last rites. An infant girl of nine months died in Mr. Chetan Ram's community. In Hinduism, people are cremated when they die. But since she was in Pakistan, the young girl was buried against the community's will. Second, there is harassment by authorities during worship and prayers. One day, Muslim *jagirbars* (landlords) interrupted a *Path* (sermon) of the Gita and demanded that the sermon cease. Third, peasants who worked as laborers in Pakistan were not given their proper wages from the *jagirbars*.

Mr. Chetan Ram further described how as a Hindu-Pakistani, it is generally understood that you are not allowed to celebrate festivals, your temples and idols will be destroyed, your houses may be burned, and women may be abducted and forcibly converted to Islam.

Mr. Rakesh Lakhani:

Mr. Rakesh Lakhani, Sindhi blogger and activist of Pakistani minorities, regularly follows news on the conditions of Hindus in Pakistan. He explained that migration served as a means of escaping the discrimination and tyranny prevalent in the cities. Unfortunately, hostility towards Hindus spread to towns and villages, eventually disseminating to all corners of Pakistan. On a daily basis, the oppression translates into a variety of restrictions, such as prohibition to establish Hindi newspapers. Infringement on the freedom of expression, among other basic human rights, is thus firmly backed by the law and Muslim majority. Mr. Lakhani argued that at no time is their voice heard. In the event that someone files a First Information Report (FIR) for complaints of discrimination or kidnappings, the investigations ultimately wind up inconclusive.



As for the conditions of Hindu women, Mr. Lakhani depicted a situation of terror. Abduction of Hindu girls and forceful conversion to Islam are commonplace across Pakistan. He recounted the story of 17-year-old Rinkle Kumari, who was kidnapped and forcefully converted to Islam in February of 2012. Her case was brought before the Supreme Court only after the family protested extensively, and international human rights advocates turned their attention to Pakistan. Yet despite widespread efforts, justice was not warranted. Rinkle Kumari was slapped in front of the judge, forced to make official statements behind closed doors, and threatened by her abductors. The case fell short of the established process of law, with cross-examinations being dismissed and politicians influencing the judges. Mr. Lakhani condemned Pakistan's pervasive injustice and lawlessness, claiming, "If the border were hypothetically opened for a day, the entire Hindu population of Pakistan would move to India." In conclusion, he demanded legal support from the Indian government. The needs of Hindu-Pakistanis must be met through realistic laws, especially, for Pakistani doctors who arrive in India only to be allowed to practice for charity.

Visa Assignment and Citizenship

When Hindus in Pakistan apply for Indian visas, they are often assigned to different states than their family or community members. Even if they apply for a specific location, they could be given a visa designated somewhere else. Once living in their assigned area, they are not permitted to leave or visit other states. This causes even

greater unforeseen problems, as refugees cannot travel to the Foreign Registration Office (FRO) in New Delhi to apply for citizenship.

Mr Kabira Ram:

When Mr. Kabira Ram applied for a visa for Bikaner in Rajasthan, he instead received a visa for Haryana. He came to India twenty-two years ago, abiding by his visa restrictions and living in Haryana. After living in India for five years, Mr. Kabira Ram applied for citizenship. His request was denied and the government has continued to delay his files. His children could not study after Class 10 in Haryana because they did not have the proper documents. Mr. Kabira Ram has recently moved to Jodhpur because of Seemant Lok Sangathan's efforts to provide him and his community with a better chance of receiving citizenship.



Mr. Kabira Ram's family has been divided and strained by the constant limitations of visa assignments. For example, his daughter married a man living in Jodhpur. Mr. Kabira Ram could not meet his in-laws until some time after the wedding, because he was not permitted to enter Rajasthan with his visa. "This is not right," he proclaimed at the hearing. "The government should consider these things before granting visas."

Mr. Jeevan Ram:

Mr. Jeevan Ram came to India with thirteen other immigrants. He applied in Pakistan for a visa to live in Rajasthan, where his family currently resides. However, he was given a visa for Haridwar. Regardless of his visa, he is taking the risk to live on a farm in the Al Kausar settlement in Chopasni, a suburb of Jodhpur. This is a common example of how families are divided by the complicated visa process.

Land Grabbing

Mr. Urja Ram:

When the group Mr. Urja Ram migrated with arrived in India, the government promised them 113 acres of land in Mohangarh, Jaisalmer. The land was divided into several plots and given away to other people. They reapplied to the land collector, but were still only allotted twenty-five acres of their promised land.

Education

Ms. Devi Rani:

Ms. Rani is a twenty-three year old woman currently living in Kudi Bhagtasni Housing Board with her family. She pays 3000 rupees for rent each month. She originally came to India as an infant, living in Haryana. She was pursuing a B. Tech degree (Bachelor's Degree in Technology) at the Manav Institute in Hisar. However, she had to leave her studies because she did not have citizenship or a caste certificate. None of her siblings are allowed to attend school either. Ms. Rani described how she wants to make a future for herself, how she wants to make something of her life. But she cannot do so, because she cannot even attend school.



Mr. Kishor:

Mr. Kishor could not gain admission into college in India because he did not obtain proper documentation, as he does not have citizenship. The fees for college are also much more expensive because he cannot receive a caste certificate.

Health Care

Sadly, the injustice transcends to health care services. The refugee settlements are several kilometers from public hospitals, to which they cannot drive to in the event of an emergency. An older woman at the public hearing shared her experience of how her husband fell ill and could not receive proper treatment. The only alternative left then is to seek care from private doctors and hospitals, though these are far more costly. The woman's account echoed the sentiments of Hindu-Pakistani families who face these hurdles daily. Men and women of all ages are left with nowhere to go, especially when in need of intricate surgeries or prenatal care.

Solidarity for Seemant Lok Sangathan

Many speakers were enthusiastic and expressed solidarity within the community. They conveyed their full support of Seemant Lok Sangathan and the hope they have for change and justice.

Mr. Chetan Ram:

Mr. Chetan Ram is the group leader of the 171 Pakistani refugees who migrated to India in October 2012. Seemant Lok Sangathan initially organized room for them to

live in the Dali Bai temple in Jodhpur, where they remained for seven months. They are now living in a government shelter in Jodhpur. Seemant Lok Sangathan has provided them with twenty-one fans, access to drinking water, and admission of the children into public schools. Mr. Chetan Ram expressed his support and loyalty for SLS, stating he believes in SLS' solidarity and has hope for change in the future. He claimed he would do anything to aid the organization and its efforts.

Mr. Chetan Das:

One of the final speakers was a schoolteacher, Mr. Chetan Das, who has volunteered extensively with Seemant Lok Sangathan. In an effort to solidify refugee unity, Mr. Chetan Das encouraged all Hindu-Pakistanis to collaborate in the formation of a cohesive group. He argued their cries for justice would only be heard if they raised their voice in unison.



Proposals for the Future

Near the end of the hearing, dignitaries from the panel voiced their proposals for ways in which to approach the issue in the future.

Lawyer and senior advocate in the Rajasthan High Court, Mr. Mahesh Bora argued the group must plan for a new course of action. Fighting for justice within the law has been tried time after time, despite continuous failures. He encouraged Hindu-Pakistanis to unite and protest for protection of their rights. Additionally, he asserted that forceful, united action would show the Government of India that there truly is a need for a national, comprehensive refugee law. Finally, he concluded noting that model refugee laws, drafted by individuals and organizations, must be reconsidered and evaluated by the Central Government.



Chairman of the Rajasthan Lawyer's Association, Mr. DP Joshi found common ground in Mr. Mahesh Bora's statement. Mr. Joshi conveyed his support for the refugee community passionately, proving that having been arrested would not restrain his backing for their cause.

General Secretary of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Ms. Kavita Srivastava, however, presented a different view and suggested Hindu-Pakistanis fight for justice through the legal system. She proposed they present their case to the High Court and Supreme Court. Her support for the Pakistani minorities was further conveyed through organizing the attendance of the law interns from PUCL at the event.



Chairman of the Rajasthan State Commission for Women, Ms. Lad Kumari Jain, recognized the undue legal treatment of the refugees, and the diverse human rights violations they are regularly victims of. She expressed a sincere interest in taking up the issue, and fighting to bring justice to all Pakistani minorities. But first, she requested discussing the issue with Seemant Lok Sangathan, with the purpose of understanding the matter more thoroughly. Her conversations with girls and women of the refugee community allowed her to take note of challenges in education, prenatal care, childbirth, etc. Thereafter, she promised to present the case to the government of Rajasthan, thus utilizing her involvement and expertise to serve as an advocate for the cause.

Memorandum

The public hearing concluded with the composition of a memorandum. The document voiced the nine demands made by Seemant Lok Sangathan and outlined the suggestions proposed by the dignitaries for further action. Mr. Hindu Singh Sodha signed the memorandum. He, along with a large group of volunteers and central committee members of SLS, delivered the document to the Divisional Commissioner. The memorandum was then sent to the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Manmohan Singh, and the Chief Minister of Rajasthan, Mr. Ashok Gahlot.

In the News

Local news stations, such as ETV, covered the hearing and interviewed Mr. Hindu Singh Sodha and other dignitaries. The public hearing was featured in newspapers the following day, June 21, 2013, including Rajasthan Patrika, Hindustan Times, and Dainik Bhaskar.



Many thanks to all who participated in this public hearing.

Seemant Lok Sangathan

Dignitaries

Speakers

Refugees

Volunteers

Students

News Coverage